Fairbury's Second Murder in 1898

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Over Fairbury's 168-year existence, a total of eight murders were committed. The first murder case was that of Ida Mae Steers in 1896.

She was seventeen years old and was murdered by twenty-six-year-old Charles Burrell. Mr. Burrell was the hired farm hand for the Bert Steers family south of Fairbury. During March and April of 1896, he attempted to court the seventeen-year-old Ida Mae Steers.

Ida Mae Steers broke off the relationship, and Mr. Burrell decided that if she would not be his girlfriend, he would murder her. Mr. Burrell shot Ida Mae Steers, and she died a couple of weeks before her eighteenth birthday.

Just two years after Mr. Burrell murdered Ida Mae Steers, another murder occurred, which also involved romantic relationships in 1898. The story of the second murder in Fairbury's history began with the birth of Earl Hanna in 1875. He was a young man with a strong and active frame and undoubted physical courage.

The fact that Earl's father, Zachariah, was a Fairbury Constable did not keep his son from having trouble with the law. When Earl was nineteen years old, he was arrested for stealing chickens from Mr. William Shedd in Weston. For this crime, he served a year in the Reform School at Pontiac.

After Earl served his time in the Reform School, he was not considered a vicious character and was not in the habit of carrying weapons. After his father's death, he became a paper hanger and contributed his earnings liberally to the support of his mother and family. Earl was direct and reliable in business matters. Although he was not a young man with spotless morals, he was not at all a dangerous or desperate character.

Joseph Ellis was born in 1874. Both of his parents were from Germany. Ellis came to Fairbury from Pontiac in 1898. He had relatives in both Fairbury and Pontiac. The family had lived in the county for many years. He worked in Ellis' saloon for some time. He was rather tall and rawboned, with black hair and eyes. He was in the habit of carrying arms but did not have a desperate reputation.

Winnie (Winnifred) Rogers came from one of the pioneering families of Fairbury on the Straight side of her family. She was born in 1875 and also grew up in Fairbury. Her parents were Samuel S. Rogers and Caroline Straight.

Winnie's half-sister, Mary Esther Mattoon, married prominent Cairo, Illinois, attorney William Nicholas Butler. W. N. Butler went on to become a State's Attorney and, eventually, a Judge in Cairo, Illinois.

In early 1898, Winnie Rogers was dating Earl Hanna. Winnie and Earl were both twenty-three years old. She was very enamored with him. At some point, Earl lost interest in Winnie and started to date another girl. Winnie desperately wanted to continue her

relationship with Earl and wrote him letters describing her affection towards him. Earl sometimes did not answer her messages. Other times, Earl did not reply civilly to Winnie's letters.

Winnie decided to make Earl Hanna jealous by dating another boy. She started to date twenty-four-year-old Joe Ellis. This situation created issues between Earl Hanna and Joe Ellis. Then Winnie got into a physical fight with Earl Hanna's new girlfriend. After the fight started, Earl Hanna convinced Joe Ellis to stay out of it and let the girls fight it out.

After this fight was over, Winnie Rogers wrote a letter to Earl Hanna. In this letter, Winnie said that she had told Joe Ellis that Earl had called Joe a coward. Winnie warned Earl Hanna that "every dog has its day." At this point, Joe Ellis had apparently made up his mind to shoot Earl Hanna the next time they met.

On Tuesday evening, April 6, 1898, Winnie and Earl Hanna went for a walk along Hickory Street. They left Winnie's home around 8 PM. Joe Ellis and his friend Louis Gagnon were also taking a walk in Fairbury. The two parties met on the north side of Hickory Street, between Fifth and Sixth Streets.

Joe Ellis then asked Earl Hanna why he held such a big grudge against him. Earl told Joe that he knew full well why he had the grudge. Joe Ellis then pulled a gun and demanded that Earl Hanna get down on his knees and apologize to Winnie. Earl told Joe Ellis that he was crazy, and he would not get down on his knees. Joe Ellis then fired his gun at Earl Hanna. The bullet entered Earl's body about two inches to the left of the lower extremity of the breast bone.

Joe Ellis then told Earl that if that bullet did not fix him, he would fire another shot into him. Winnie then pleaded with Joe Ellis not to shoot again. Earl Hanna staggered back and told the group he was dying. Winnie then cried out, "You got just what you deserve. I am glad of it."

Louis Gagnon helped the wounded Earl Hanna walk to the residence of Marion Babb, and Dr. Otis was summoned. Earl lived through the night but died at 5:20 AM the next morning.

Ellis and Miss Rogers went to the residence of her foster parents across the street from where Hanna lay. Ellis went from there to his uncle's saloon uptown and afterwards returned to the Rogers residence. After a time, Winnie came over to Babb's and asked about Hanna's condition. Winnie said at the inquest that this was not because she cared anything about it but because Ellis wanted to know.

Gertrude Hassenfratz was a seventeen-year-old girl who lived close to Winnie Rogers. On the night of the shooting, Gertrude was also taking a walk on Hickory Street with a friend. She encountered Winnie and Joe Ellis together. Winnie told her they were looking for Earl Hanna and that Joe was going to shoot him. The evidence of Miss Hassenfratz created a great sensation because it appeared to implicate Miss Rogers in the crime.

Joe Ellis fled Fairbury. Warrants were issued for both Joe Ellis and Winnie Rogers. Miss Rogers was arrested at her home by Constable Joe Galloway. Eventually, she was granted bail. No record of any trial for her can be found.

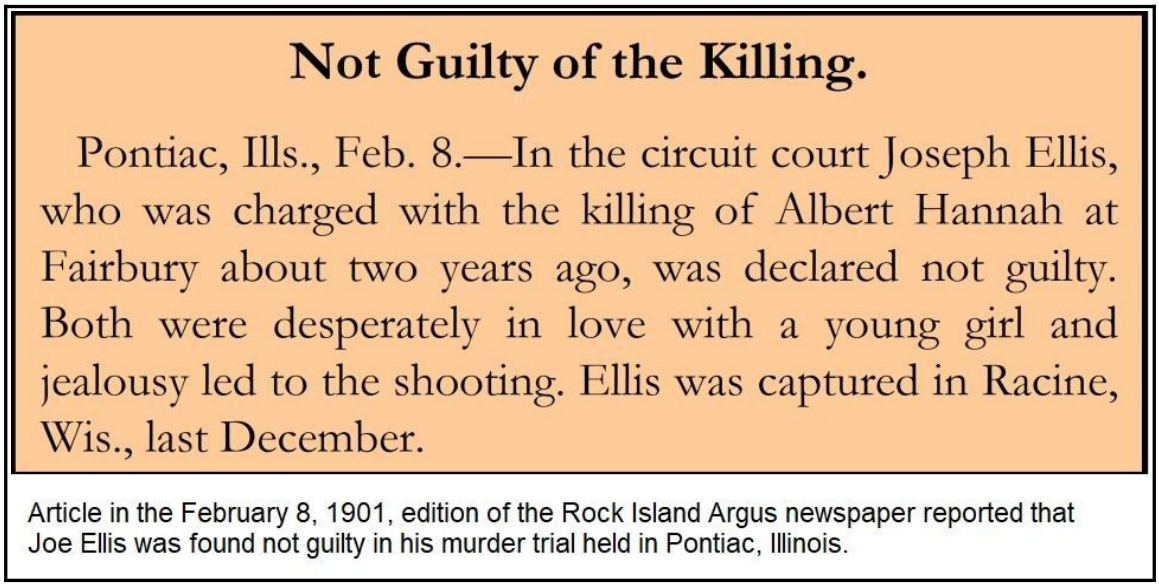
Thirty-three months after the shooting, Joe Ellis was apprehended in Racine, Wisconsin. He was returned to Pontiac for trial. By that time, Winnie Rogers had married Francis J. Carbine of Michigan.

Winnie's family enlisted the help of W. N. Butler, husband of Winnie's half-sister, Mary Esther Mattoon. Mr. Butler put Joe Ellis on the witness stand. Joe swore that he was afraid of Hanna and that the night of the shooting, Hanna had a revolver.

It was the universal opinion that Ellis would have been found guilty but for a letter introduced by the defense. Hanna wrote this letter to Winifred Rogers in which he threatened the life of Ellis. W. N. Butler of Cairo read the letter, and it was the turning point in favor of the defendant. Up to this time, it looked as though he would receive a sentence. Joe Ellis was found not guilty of murdering Earl Hanna.

Slain Earl Hanna was buried with his parents in Fairbury's cemetery. Their graves are located in the northwest portion of the cemetery.

This second murder was a case of romantic relationships between three young people that evolved into a significant tragedy in Fairbury's history.



Not Guilty of the Killing.

Pontiac, Ills., Feb. 8.—In the circuit court Joseph Ellis, who was charged with the killing of Albert Hannah at Fairbury about two years ago, was declared not guilty. Both were desperately in love with a young girl and jealousy led to the shooting. Ellis was captured in Racine, Wis., last December.

Article in the February 8, 1901, edition of the Rock Island Argus newspaper reported that Joe Ellis was found not guilty in his murder trial held in Pontiac, Illinois.